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# The Perceived Impact of Curricular Maps on Student Retention at a Community College

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Amy Ertwine

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Dr. Nicolae Nistor, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty

Dr. James Crosby, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Dr. Ionut-Dorin Stanciu, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2020

Abstract

The Perceived Impact of Curricular Maps on Student Retention at a Community College

by

Amy Ertwine

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

May 2020

## Abstract

The problem at a community college in a state in the Eastern region of the United States is the lack of evaluation of the effect of Guided Pathways implementation on student retention in the local setting. Retention efforts are a concern of administrators of community colleges across the United States. To help students succeed, faculty often give students a specified set of core courses and a specific or even prescribed pathway to complete general education requirements. The community college incorporated Guided Pathways into retention efforts in Fall 2015. Over the past 4 years, the college has undertaken more activities focusing on increasing knowledge about the Pathways but has not yet evaluated the retention strategy. The purpose of this study was to explore student and faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of Guided Pathways as a retention strategy at one community college. Tinto's model of student integration was used as the study's theoretical framework. Interviews were conducted with 15 students who were enrolled in English 101 for the first time in Fall 2015 through Fall 2018 and with 4 full-time faculty who taught English 101 on the same campus. Following a thorough review of the transcribed material, I organized the data using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Then, I coded quotes into categories, and developed emerging themes. Students addressed the themes costs, support, and time constraints, whereas faculty focused on community and advising as main retention factors. The results of this study may impact positive social change by improving educational policy and practice in community colleges through a greater importance on positive student qualities and organizational practices that work together to predict student success rather than predict attrition.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my son, Zachary, and my husband, Jerry.

## Acknowledgments

I want to thank everyone who has made this possible.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Student retention at community colleges is a problem in the United States.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the average student does not complete an associate degree within the first 2 years (NCES, 2011a). The focus of this study was on one community college in a state in the Eastern region of the United States. As community college leaders look for ways to increase student retention, studying why students do not continue their education is important. There are many reasons why students do not stay in school, whether it be financial or even lack of desire. In this study, I focused on student and faculty perceptions of the implementation of curriculum mapping at a community college. Curriculum mapping provides students with clear, educationally coherent program maps that include specific course sequences, progress milestones, and program learning outcomes (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). The results of this study may enable higher education leaders to more easily identify barriers to student retention, which in turn would create positive social change. It is important to retain students in higher education, because it can have a positive impact on increasing human capital and governmental revenue (Pluhta & Penny, 2013).

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the problem background, the significance of this study, and the conceptual framework on which this study was based. I used Tinto's (1975) retention theory as the conceptual framework to help guide the case study I conducted. Additionally, the research questions (RQs) and the nature of this qualitative case study are presented and explained. Chapter 1 also includes key and discussion of the

assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations of this qualitative case study. The chapter concludes with a summary and an introduction to subsequent chapters.

### **Background**

Community colleges are the primary means of entry into the U.S. higher education system. Most community colleges have convenient locations, making it easier for students to attend. Community colleges do not have stern admission criteria; most students are able to enter with either a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED; Knowlton, Fogleman, Reichsman, & Oliveira, 2015). Community colleges across the United States have developed early college access programs as well (Veney, & Sugimoto, 2017). Due to lower costs, community colleges tend to enroll students who are more academically, economically, and socially disadvantaged than do other postsecondary institutions (Feldman, & Romano, 2019). In addition to the lower costs, students attending community colleges are able to enter the workforce sooner than their peers at other institutions. Attending a community college typically takes 2 years to complete a degree. A more structured higher education allows students to graduate faster and only take the courses they need to pursue a career (Jacob & Gokbel, 2018).

Guided Pathways, a curricular map, is a structured model developed by Bailey et al. (2015). This model was developed to help create a more structured program for students entering higher education. Guided Pathways is a student-centered approach that can increase the number of students earning community college credentials, while closing equity gaps (Bailey et al., 2015). Creating a curricular map for students using Guided

Pathways helps students know exactly what courses they need and prevents them from taking unnecessary coursework (Connolly, Flynn, Jemmott, & Oestreicher, 2017).

Hongwei (2015) identified the gap in practice, noting that not all community colleges in the United States have such a structured program as Guided Pathways. These maps are aligned to knowledge and skills required by 4-year institutions and the labor market, thus ensuring that students can continue their studies and advance in their careers (Bailey et al., 2015). Students who enter a specific program of study within their first year of college are more likely to receive an associate degree or successfully transfer than students who do not enter a program of study until the second year or later (Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016). Students who have a structured plan like Guided Pathways demonstrate higher rates of retention and completion (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016).

Understanding what keeps students at college helps higher education institutions increase student retention rates. Community colleges' commitment is to provide open access to the community. Their students are usually not prepared for the challenges that come with higher education and tend to drop out before completing their intended degree (Bailey, Jaggars, Jenkins, & Columbia University, 2016). Keeping students motivated is an important function of professors and advisors at these institutions. There has been a significant amount of research regarding professional development for teachers and professors (Knowlton et al., 2015). If teachers and professors are working together to help students, students will most likely continue taking courses towards graduation. By

providing students with a view of the big picture early and often, students can stay on course towards graduation (Mayer et al., 2010). Curriculum mapping like Guided Pathways will help present the “big picture” for students. The more times the pathway is used, the stronger the connection with students (Lang, 2016). College students are more likely to complete a degree within a reasonable time if they develop an academic plan early on. Guided Pathways for all programs give students guidance to help them stay on plan (Kruglaya, 2018).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem examined in this study was low student retention at a community college in a state in the Eastern region of the United States. According to Thompson, Vogler, and Xiu (2017), on average, 58% of undergraduate students in the United States complete college within a 6-year period. At the time of this study, the retention rate at the Community College of Flamestown (CCFt; pseudonym) for first-year community college students was only 43%, according to the institution’s website. Over the past 10 years, first-year retention at CCFt has ranged from 66-69% for the first semester, but only 45-50% for the second semester. Approximately 11% of students who enter an associate degree track graduate within the first two years of admission, according to the institution’s website.

A review of data from CCFt’s website indicates that students typically return for one semester but then get lost in the sequencing. This could be related to not knowing which course to take next or transferring to another college. According to the institution’s

website, the number of students who entered CCFT in Fall 2012 was 19,446. Only 12,718 (65%) of these students returned in Spring 2013. Of the students who started in Fall 2012, only 46% ( $N = 8,951$ ) returned at the start of Fall 2013. That percentage had decreased to 37% ( $N = 7,251$ ) by Spring 2014. Data for later years reflects the same pattern. The number of students who entered CCFT in Fall 2015 was 23,584. In Spring 2016, only 69% ( $N = 16,265$ ) returned for a sequential semester. Of the students who started Fall 2015, only a 50% ( $N = 11,753$ ) were retained for the Fall 2016 semester. Not all students were enrolled in Guided Pathways in 2015 when it was first implemented. Now all students are enrolled in Guided Pathways upon admission. Although the student population increased, retention rates remained approximately 45-50% between 2012-2018.

Schools who do not retain students lose tuition as well as the combined resources of instruction, and support services that are spent on those students are eventually lost to attrition. According to my research, there has never been an extensive study of student retention at CCFT. This case study filled those gaps. The participants in this study were first-generation students enrolled in English 101 on one campus at CCFT between 2015-2018. Findings also provide insight about common retention problems at U.S. community colleges.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore student and faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of Guided Pathways as a retention strategy at one community college. In 2015, Bailey et al. proposed a Guided Pathways model that involves restructuring student

experiences, from the stage where students choose programs and start remedial or college-level work to the time of graduation, when they move on to further education or careers. The vice president of instruction noted that CCFt has not examined the overall effect of Guided Pathways on retention. I conducted this study to provide insight on whether students and faculty at CCFt felt that Guided Pathways helped with retention. Jenkins and Cho (2013) stressed the importance of further studies to examine student perceptions of using Guided Pathways.

### **Research Questions**

I sought to answer the following RQs:

RQ1: How do students perceive the relationship between student retention and implementation of Guided Pathways?

RQ2: How do faculty perceive the relationship between student retention and implementation of Guided Pathways?

### **Conceptual Framework**

I based the conceptual framework for this study on Tinto's 1975 and 1993 theories on retention (Tinto, 1975, 2006). Tinto, a professor at Syracuse University, has researched student persistence in higher education for more than 30 years. One of Tinto's (1975) theories of retention is that students will be much more likely to continue in school when they feel part of the college community, both socially and academically. Tinto (1975) found that the student's background characteristics and goals, along with the characteristics of the institution, help determine how well the student will integrate into



the institution both academically and socially. The level of integration will then determine the likelihood of the student persisting; the higher the level of integration, the more likely the student will persist and vice versa (Tinto, 2017). Student persistence is a behavior that is psychologically motivated (Bean & Eaton, 2000). Although Tinto (1975) realized the relationship between students and their institution influenced retention, the theory of retention focused mainly on students' perceptions of fit and integration. According to CCFt's model, students can interact effectively within the campus environment in ways that strengthen their desire to complete their education. Research shows that student success and faculty collaboration are major components in student retention (Albertine, 2017).

Components of Guided Pathways include course tracks that simplify the selection of courses; provide more focused advising; and encourage increased interactions among students, faculty, and support staff (Jenkins & Cho, 2013). Creating and maintaining positive relationships is a fundamental motivation until a student has reached at least a minimum level of social contact and relatedness with others (Deaton, 2015; Furrer, Skinner, & Pitzer, 2014). Incorporating Guided Pathways into students' educational experiences will give students predictable course schedules that make it easier to organize their lives around school and graduate on time. The interaction of the student within institutions has also been found to play a role in student persistence/departure decisions (Kim & Lundberg, 2016). Tinto (1975) specifically detailed the role of institutional academic and social integration as key factors in persistence (see Figure 1). Although

Tinto's and that of other researchers research indicates that the "engaged" student is more likely to stay, in reviewing the literature, I found few studies of the factors that improve student retention. Research has shown consistently that efforts to improve or maintain student motivation can lead to better retention and achievement (Martinez, 1997).

I used Tinto's (1975, 2006) model of retention when developing interview questions for study participants. The model theorizes that students who socially integrate into the campus community increase their commitment to the institution and are more likely to graduate (Tinto, 1975). With the implementation of Guided Pathways, students will be socially integrated with other students in like majors. I researched the relationship between academic advising, student success, student retention, and teaching in depth (see the literature review in Chapter 2).

### **Nature of the Study**

This qualitative case study involved completing interviews with students and faculty to gain insight on their perceptions related to retention and Guided Pathways. Bailey et al. (2016) noted that using a qualitative case study approach can be beneficial in investigating strategies for increasing student retention. In conducting this case study, I wanted to elicit a deeper understanding of the perceptions of students and faculty at CCFT regarding implementation of Guided Pathways. I developed structured interview questions to answer the RQs about the effectiveness of implementation of Guided Pathways at CCFT.

### **Definitions**

*Academic advising:* The process between the student and an academic advisor of discussing educational and career plans and making appropriate course selections (Tudor, 2018).

*Curriculum mapping:* A structured map that helps simplify decision-making for students by providing intentional opportunities for exploration and informed choices (Bailey et al., 2015).

*Student engagement:* Students actively showing interest in completing their academic journey (Kahu, 2013).

*Student retention:* A process of ensuring student success or graduation (Braxton, 2014).

### **Assumptions**

The first assumption was that the students understand their own learning process and the importance of Guided Pathways. Another assumption was that the students and faculty would be honest in their responses to interview questions. Since the students were not receiving any benefit from this study, I did not think they would have any reason to be negative. The student volunteered to complete the interview, giving them no reason to lie. The findings of this study cannot be generalized to other institutions as the study was conducted at one community college.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study was limited to all first-time students who enrolled into a Guided Pathway from 2015 through 2019 at CCFT. Students were selected from a pool of participants that entered English 101 as a first-generation student on one campus between 2015-2019. Faculty were selected from pool of full-time faculty teaching in English 101 on one specific campus. CCFT is a multi-campus community college. This study was focused on one of the campuses.

The study was delimited to a community college in the eastern part of the United States. Another delimitation of the study was that returning students, or students who do not fall within the 2015-2019 academic years, were not included.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of the study was that it does not account for additional factors such as previous college experience. As the sample was obtained from one college and was not a random sample, the study only defines a phenomenon at the college studied. Other potential limitations of this study included time constraints, the phenomena of the study, the type of study being conducted (qualitative, case study), as well as researcher bias. I am a full-time associate professor at the college, but I do not teach in the general education courses which the participants were selected from. I am familiar with the organization being studied, and I am aware of information that was deemed to be external, but not necessarily public. The participants were selected with the help of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (PRE) at CCFT.

### **Significance**

The results of this study could be used by higher education institutions in framing solutions to improve student retention that involve using the Guided Pathways model. In addition, this study could make an original contribution to the local setting by helping administration at CCFt to determine the value of Guided Pathways and student retention. This study could make an original contribution in the field of higher education and adult learning if results of the research provide evidence that programs such as Guided Pathways support students from admission through graduation. The interviews could provide data that illuminate what is working and not working from the student, faculty, and alumni perception, regarding the implementation of Guided Pathways at CCFt. The results of this study may impact positive social change by improving educational policy and practice in community colleges through a greater importance on positive student qualities and organizational practices that work together to predict student success rather than predict attrition. As the higher educational institutions that enroll the largest population of disadvantaged students, community colleges must develop support systems to ensure the success of these individuals and to promote their development as important members of the community.

### **Summary**

Student retention in higher education will always be a concern. There are many reasons why students do not continue with their education. Implementing Guided Pathways may be a small step in the right direction to help students have a map of their

course work and not derail them with too many options of course work. Enhanced academic support services (tutoring, supplemental instruction and study groups) were partially organized and supported by the student's selected Pathway. Students worked with faculty members and participate in Pathway-related clubs, field trips, service learning and guest speaker events with students who share common interests. Including students in such activities will help them feel part of the environment and want to continue their education. Students that feel a connection to the institution are more likely to stay in college (Woods-Giscombe, Johnson Rowsey, Kneipp, Lackey, & Bravo, 2019). Chapter 2 will contain a more detailed review of the literature relating to student retention, curriculum mapping, academic integration, goal commitment, and institutional commitment.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem at CCFt is low student retention. Community colleges throughout the United States struggle with poor student retention. NCES (2011a) data show that the average student does not complete an associate degree within the first 2 years. At the time of this study, the retention rate at CCFt for first-year community college students was only 43%, according to the institution's website. In 2015, CCFt initiated a new retention model, Guided Pathways (Bailey et al., 2015), to help increase student retention. Its effectiveness, and retention more broadly, at CCFt had not been examined prior to this study. The purpose of this study was to explore student and faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of Guided Pathways as a retention strategy at one community college.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I completed the literature review using multiple research databases. I focused on articles published within the past 5 years (2014-2019). The following databases were used: ERIC, Academic Search Premier, Education Source, and Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations. I reviewed a number of studies to identify relevant literature for this study. Classic articles were included if they provided value to the work. In addition to the numerous dissertations on retention among community colleges, a number of journal articles also address this vast topic. Terms used in the search for literature included *academic advising*, *student retention*, *student success*, *curriculum mapping*, *Guided Pathways*, *perceptions*, and *faculty collaboration*.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Tinto's (1998) student integration model provided the theoretical framework for this study. Researchers who developed previous models of student persistence focused on a limited number of factors believed to cause an individual to drop out (Martinez, 1997; Tinto, 1998). Two factors distinguished Tinto's model of student integration from prior models. First, Tinto used a longitudinal approach to illustrate the interactions between an individual and an institution. Additionally, Tinto identified ways in which an individual might leave an institution. Prior to 1975, models of student persistence categorized all individuals who left college into a single group, rather than describing the behaviors that causes individuals to drop out (Tinto, 1975). Tinto suggested that, because individuals who left an institution were stereotyped as "dropouts," researchers did not pursue the factors accounting for poor retention. Researchers need to continue to understand why students do not complete their education.

## **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable**

### **Student Retention**

Student retention is on the mind of all administrators of community colleges. According to Tinto (1998), there are three principles of effective retention: "enduring commitment to the students; institutional commitment to the education of all students; and the principle that effective retention programs focus on the integration of all students into the social and academic communities of a college" (p. 146). Students who participate in retention strategies early on are more likely to be successful. Students who seek



assistance from the retention program only after failing two exams, as opposed to at the beginning of a class, are less likely to successfully complete the class (Hongwei, 2015).

Approximately 40% of U.S. students complete any type of degree within 6 years (Bailey et al., 2015). All community colleges collect data regarding student attrition rates and how many students transfer prior to receiving a degree. Van Noy, Trimble, Jenkins, Barnett, and Wachen (2016) found that students who enter a program of study in their first year are much more likely to receive an associate degree, or transfer successfully, than are students who do not get into a program until the second year or later. Providing students with support from academic advising ensures that students will feel supported throughout their time at the college and beyond, according to Tudor, (2018). Community colleges need to explore ways to improve persistence, completion, and transfer outcomes for students (Hongwei, 2015; Kruglaya, 2018).

According to Jarzombek, McCuiston, Bain, Guerrero, and Wester (2017), retention continues to be a problem at community colleges and universities. Students who are academically disadvantaged, or first generation in their family, are at high risk of failing or dropping out (Jarzombek et al., 2017). By identifying at-risk students early, academic advisors and faculty can work with the student by increasing support and keeping the student engaged; research indicates that offering more activities for students increases student retention (Jarzombek et al., 2017). According to Jarzombek et al. (2017), having a structured model for students helps with student retention. The study focused on first-year students at a college that has students with diverse backgrounds.

Students who enter college without any previous college experience in their family are considered first-generation students. These students usually do not complete coursework at the same pace as students who have parents who have graduated from college.

Offering these students support will help with increasing student retention, however.

Having a mentor of the same social or ethnic background allows the student to have someone to talk to who may have had similar challenges (Jarzombek et al., 2017).

Students who feel wanted will be more likely to return and stay motivated (Jarzombek et al., 2017).

The goal of community colleges is to retain students and provide the support they need to succeed. Across the United States, the six-year completion rate for first-year students is approximately 52% (Shapiro et al., 2017). Institutions need to identify ways to increase student persistence to completion. One of the major factors in higher education is funding availability. Not all students are eligible for grants and scholarships. Student tuition is continuing to rise, class sizes are high, more classes are being taught online by adjuncts rather than face-to-face with a full-time professor, and there is less support for students; all are factors that lead to lower graduation rates (Mettler, 2014). According to the American Council on Education (2018), the Aim Higher Act would be significantly more generous than current programs for students and borrowers, increasing funding levels and helping students who borrow money for school. Strengthening Pell Grants is a critical step in ensuring access to college for all qualified students (Watson, & Chen,

2019). Students do not always have the funds to pay for college, providing more support can help increase the students' knowledge.

Retaining students is a priority and challenge in higher education. Elevated dropout rates have remained consistent over the past 100 years (Tinto, 2006). Tinto (2006) concluded that students were dropping out at high rate with minimal variation over the years. Decades after Tinto's study, the problem continues in higher education.

### **Goal Commitment**

Student success focuses on how well the student is prepared for higher education. Retention models like Guided Pathways can extend beyond the borders of community colleges by informing transfer orientation practices at 4-year institutions (Veney & Sugimoto, 2017; Wheeler, 2019). Higher education institutions want to retain students and teach them how to enter the workforce. Research has shown that performance is best fostered when students are engaged in a practice that focuses on a specific goal such as graduation (Mayer et al., 2010). Students have high expectations when they enter higher education institutions (Braxton, 2014). Incorporating more social interactions often leads to students developing a sense of belongingness and wanting to continue to return. According to Braxton (2014), incorporating organized events such as orientation for first-year students gives students opportunities to learn normal activities for the community college. Service learning is an activity-based learning to help students become connected with the community while providing a valuable service to the community (Lang, 2016).

Students who are more engaged in their education have higher rates of graduation. Tinto (2017) emphasized the need for a coherent framework for institutional action based on research and guided by theory. According to Mettler (2014) higher education is failing students. Colleges need to improve student success rates. Assisting students with attaining their post-secondary aspirations is demonstrated by high student success rates (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). Creating a structured framework will provide a comprehensive effort to foster student success. In a study completed by Arhin and Wang'Eri (2018), the researchers examined the perception of students on orientation programs provided to them and how perceptions predicted retention. Orientation programs are used to introduce new students to college services that support their educational and personal goals, and they also assist students in gaining the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that will help them adjust and make a smooth transition into the community college setting (Arhin & Wang'Eri, 2018). Structured orientation programs inform students what services are available. The findings of this study revealed that retention rates were higher for students who participated in orientation programs, compared to students who did not attend orientation. Students reported positive perception towards the orientation program provided by the university. Providing students with all the resources available can help them want to continue to enroll in courses and be more successful.

### **Curriculum Mapping**

Colleges focus on retaining students and curriculum mapping is a good way for students to see exactly what courses they need to take. Curriculum mapping is a

structured map that is created based on the students' educational track; it is a spreadsheet that gives the student a comprehensive view of a class's requirements, how the students meet those requirements, and if a student needs new resources to address different standards (Archambault & Masunaga, 2015; Lammerding-Koeppel et al., 2018; Zook, 2018). The map is created for a visual exhibit of coursework. This prevents students from unknowingly taking unnecessary courses and wasting money. Curriculum mapping has been established as an important strategy that colleges are using to identify instruction opportunities within the academic curriculum (Jacobsen, Eaton, Brown, Simmons, & McDermott, 2018; LeMire & Graves, 2019).

Guided Pathways is one type of curriculum mapping (Rawle, Bowen, Murck, & Hong, 2017; Zook, 2018). Guided Pathways is a navigational system for students to understand their way through their entire college experience to completion (Strobel & Christian, 2016). The premise behind Guided Pathways is that there will be more efficient targeting of information about careers and transfer options and more support for students. Guided Pathways is a structured model that colleges have begun to implement to help students move through college courses (Doan & Rushche, 2017). Some experts believe persistence is related to student success.

By offering a structured model like Guided Pathways, colleges can offer students a more effective, structured model and help students obtain their degree. Belfield, Crosta, and Jenkins (2014) discussed how implementing a more structured model like Guided Pathways can improve student retention. By offering a more structured program, students

know what they are spending and do not take a lot of unnecessary course work that prevents them from being able to afford advancing their education (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2018; Rees, 2014; Strobel & Christian, 2016; Zook, 2018).

Community colleges are less expensive than universities, but depending on the students' academic levels, they may require remedial courses. By creating a map of course work, students know exactly what they are taking and can plan for the coursework needed to graduate or transfer. Schools are meant to equip students with knowledge and skills that will help them succeed in life (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018). By providing students with tools to be successful, retention rates will increase (Strobel & Christian, 2016). Students will want to remain at the college to continue their education, because they can see faculty and staff commit to the students' successful completion and graduation.

Allen et al. (2018) analyzed the vision or mission statements of secondary schools in Victoria, Australia, and identified 10 common themes: academic motivation, personal characteristics, school belonging, faculty support, demonstrative support, mental health promotion, the environment, Christianity, future focus, and each student's needs. In the current analysis, they examined the extent to which these 10 themes relate to academic achievement. This study demonstrated that academic motivation was the most common theme. For students to be motivated they need to feel they belong. By offering support services and increasing faculty support, students tend to feel they belong and want to return to sequential semesters.

Community colleges around the country need to look at retention efforts. Boerner (2016) explained how one college administrator was shocked at retention rates. The college administrators in the study knew they needed to make changes to be successful. The first thing that they did was send out a Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) to find out what students needed. With that information, they started pilot studies at the college's three campuses, which spread from near Denver, Colorado, to near Fort Collins, Colorado (Boerner, 2016). From the information they collected, they knew that something needed to change. Even after years of making changes, the administration continued to struggle with retention rates at their college.

By using the framework of Guided Pathways, the colleges in the study spent a year revamping everything from student intake, to faculty and staff onboarding, to marketing, curriculum development, and advising, to help students find their way to stay on track of their studies (Boerner, 2016). Each college needs to look at their retention strategies to make sure they are doing what is best for the student population. What works at one college may not work at other colleges. Administrators need to look at a lot of different variables: student population, diversity, cultures, social-economically factors, etc. Changes need to be made to benefit the majority of students. The concept behind Guided Pathways is to shift from allowing students to pick their own courses, "replacing the cafeteria college with structure and guidance that get students through developmental courses and on to their desired result" (Boerner, 2016, p. 29). Students who have a more

structured model can complete their degree faster by preventing enrollment in unnecessary coursework.

### **Social Integration**

Among various theories on student retention, Tinto's (1975) model is one of the most often cited works on student success in college. Tinto believed (p. 78) before a student enters higher education, the individual's attributes have already molded and will have an indirect effect on their decision to leave college (Tinto, 1975, 1998). He classified the attributes into three categories: prior schooling, family background, and skills and abilities. After enrolling in college, the decision of leaving school depends on their interaction with the formal/informal academic and social environment of the institution. Academic integration, social integration, and external commitment then affect a student's intention, goals, and institutional commitment, which lead to the final departure decision (Weller, Ameijde, & Cross, 2018).

The concept of curriculum mapping was brought to light in 2015 by Baileys et al. Although some colleges used a structured model, the term Guided Pathways was more defined by these authors. Created as a more structured model, Guided Pathways offers students a better way to navigate through college. In previous years, community colleges were more like a cafeteria model, students would just pick classes à la carte. As of 2017, Guided Pathways models have been implemented by more than 250 colleges, including at least ten in each of the following states: Arkansas, California, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Washington. Jenkins and Cho (2013)



discussed opportunity for practice and directions for future research to better understand how community colleges can meet the increasing number of demands to support student success in effective ways. Creating a more structured curricular map will help students understand what courses to take prior to entering their first semester of college.

Achieving the Dream demonstrates that innovative community college programs can produce and sustain increased student success, by closing achievement gaps and accelerating student success nationwide, by guiding evidence-based institutional change, engaging the public, generating knowledge, and influencing public policy (Achieving the Dream, 2019). When planning for college, students are distinguished by being “college ready” by standardized tests. These tests do not give an accurate account to the students being ready for the college experience (Bailey et al., 2016). When students plan for college, they may need to take remedial courses before starting college level classes; this could deter students from returning. There should be a relationship between placement scores and the probability of success in a college-level course (Bailey et al., 2016). This can set students up for failure even before they begin their college experience. The Common Core State Standards were implemented to connect high school graduation and college entrance expectations, but studies have shown these efforts are inconsistent (Bailey et al., 2016).

To improve college enrollment and graduation rates, students can participate in a dual enrollment program. Dual enrollment programs are set up with the high schools and community colleges to help students complete college courses faster. Students continue

to work on high school requirements and enroll in college courses. With Guided Pathways, students would be able to enroll in courses that are included in the pathway selected. This prevents students from taking a lot of courses that do not count or will not transfer. The Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) is a structured model that has gained more attention over the years (Bailey et al., 2016). This model integrates high school and the first two years of college into one institutional structure. Not all students are able to attend a P-TECH; students must meet certain requirements. The goal of structured programs is all the same: student success. Regardless of the model used for retention, administrators, teachers, and professors need to be engaged with the students. According to a study done by Soliz (2018) evidence suggested that community college enrollments and degree completions do not decline when a new degree-granting-for-profit college opens nearby. Community colleges have more advantages for a more diverse population of students. Not everyone can afford college, especially expensive universities. As stated previously, community colleges do not have strict guidelines for admission. Having a structured model is what is important for students to be successful.

### **Challenges and Barriers to Academic Success**

According to Tinto (1998), there are seven main reasons for student dropouts: (a) academic difficulties, (b) difficulties adjusting to college, (c) uncertain goals, (d) weak commitment levels, (e) difficulty paying for college, (f) lack of social and/or academic belonging, and (g) the inability to connect with classmates, faculty members, and

administrators. Students are not always prepared for higher education. Students are pushed through the educational system and expected to be able to handle themselves with higher standards in the college setting. In a study by Poyrazli and Isaiah (2018), interviews were conducted with 21 international students who were on academic probation. The results identified that students fail academically mainly because of lack of adult supervision in their academic and personal lives. Although students may live on their own, they may still need adult supervision or guidance. At CCFT, there are numerous international students as well as first generation students. The college wants to make sure students succeed and find support.

### **Academic Integration**

As community colleges look for ways to increase student retention, administrators also need to look at ways to increase availability of academic advising for students. A new approach to student retention focuses on requiring more advising to be proactive with career selection (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2014). Students do not always know what education path they want to take, right at the beginning of their college career. While 81.4% of community college students intend to complete a baccalaureate degree or higher, only 5.9% of those students received a baccalaureate degree and 13.1% received an associate degree within 5 years (NCES, 2011b). Academic advising can help with guiding students towards the correct path. Students do not usually seek help and just enroll in courses that they are interested in. By providing a more structured academic

advising process, students will have the support to help guide them through course selection (Tudor, 2018).

Curriculum mapping initiatives offer this more structured approach for students. Incorporating strategies to increase retention rates starts by finding solutions to keep students engaged and focused on student persistence (Donaldson et al., 2016). There is always going to be a better solution for a short-term problem. Colleges need to look at the long-term problem. Most studies focus on 4-year universities, and very few on community colleges. Students are going to college to obtain jobs; when educators look at first-generation students, they need to be focused on keeping them in school. Community colleges characteristically enroll a higher percentage of nontraditional, minority, underprepared, and part-time students, as well as those from low socioeconomic status, than do typical universities (Donaldson et al., 2016). Community colleges offer great opportunities for students, at affordable rates, and the focus needs to be on how educators can better prepare these students. Better career planning may eliminate explorations as a means of finding a career direction (Belser, Prescod, Daire, Dagley, & Young, 2017).

Institutions that have support and guidance of academic advising can increase a student's motivation to continue their education. Colleges where students are focused on early career planning, with industry, help demonstrate high student retention rates, higher graduation rates, and faster completion rates (Lammerding-Koeppel et al., 2018; Tudor, 2018). Increasing availability of academic resources and support allows students to feel more confident in seeking assistance. Students do not always seek assistance, but with a

more structured map, students will begin to develop relationships with other students in the same pathway. Students need to be confident in course selection and providing a more structured advising session at the beginning of their experience, proves to be beneficial (Thompson et al., 2017; Tudor, 2018). A shortage of students is predicted in the next few years (Shapiro et al., 2017). CCFt has seen retention rates fluctuate throughout the years. According to Mooring (2016), aggressive advising may help students to develop their full potential. Mooring defined aggressive advising as a frequent face-to-face meeting with students that focuses on both educational and personal stressors. Faculty do not always know what personal stressors students have. By offering more structured academic advising, advisors can be additional resources to students to help with retention.

### **Teaching, Learning, Support, and Facilities**

Faculty members are hired for their specialized knowledge within a field and do not always collaborate with other areas of education (Routhieaux, 2015). CCFt recognizes the relationship of faculty and students as being paramount to successful program completion. Therefore, face-to-face meetings with students are a large part of the program. Professional development opportunities would increase faculty collaboration and interaction. Faculty need to understand what helps students to remain at college. At CCFt, majors are placed into specific pathways and faculty are encouraged to participate in interprofessional educational activities. Encouraging faculty to work together shows a unified force for students (Brown, Roedger, & McDaniel, 2014; Elliott

et al., 2016). Since students attend college as degree-seeking individuals, encouraging faculty to work together is important. At CCFT, students are placed in a pathway based on their major. Students will then work with faculty and advisors who know the courses that are required. According to Evans, (2015) faculty members need to learn to collaborate effectively to create efficient sustainability in higher education; this will help to shift the content of the hidden curriculum toward sustainability. Higher educational institutions need to create more sustainable possibilities for students to keep retention rates up. Although difficulties exist in generalizing a study, it does support the positive effects of faculty/student interactions. Lang (2016) emphasizes that faculty need to give students opportunities to “make a positive difference in the world, including them in real-world problems and activities” (p. 221).

By working collaboratively with faculty and students, students are forced to think creatively (Harrill, Lawton, & Fabianke, 2015). In addition to having a structured map like Guided Pathways, faculty need to increase student-faculty collaboration. Incorporating activities like High-Impact Practices (HIP) into curriculum will increase student engagement. HIP is a relatively new concept in the classroom. HIPs are tools for teaching and learning which has proved to have positive effects on student retention (Hall & O’Neal, 2016; White, 2018). There are several ways to incorporate HIPs into curriculum and faculty can work together to incorporate HIPs into coursework to engage students. One of the most common types of HIPs is service learning; students can volunteer for an area of interest. All sorts of community service opportunities are

significant to tie course work to service work (Lang, 2016). Similarly, to other high-impact experiences, collaborative exploration is deemed good pedagogical practice (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). Students who are engaged more have higher completion rates. Including students in the planning of activities increase students' motivation.

The importance of student support has been documented by other authors. Lang (2016) highlighted the importance of faculty support. Lang sought to determine the effectiveness of retention strategies for first-year college students through the perception of faculty advisors. Faculty need to be offered professional development to help support student success. Carey (2015), discussed how as humans, we love patterns; it's hard to notice a learning opportunity if it does not fit within a pattern. Once a person gets into a pattern, it's hard to change. Higher education needs to change. Offering structure should be the new pattern. Educators cannot teach the same way they did years ago. Students have changed over the years. According to Albertine (2017), in collaboration with multiple states the Liberal Education and Americas Promise (LEAP) was "developed to help with student success by embracing and nurturing faculty leadership at the state level" (p. 4). Helping faculty by offering more professional development helps them become more prepared to assist with students who are high risk. Faculty tend to get comfortable in how they teach and do not focus on what is best for the students. Teaching the same way, educators did twenty years ago is not relevant in today's classroom.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In review of the literature, I reviewed academic advising, student retention, student success, curriculum mapping, Guided Pathways, perceptions, and faculty collaboration. The literature I covered provides the foundation for this qualitative research case study. Whereas the literature review highlights research and successful strategies to improve retention, it also suggests a gap in practice in terms of the students' perception of what works in retention. Guided Pathways has only been in the spotlight since 2015 (Bailey et al., 2015). Many people do not know what Guided Pathways is, including the students that are enrolled in the courses. This case study will bring light to the subject and move towards more understanding of the Guided Pathway and its relationship with retention.

Community colleges have had a focus on access, and the primary concern was for getting students through the door and enrolled in classes. This is not to say that there was no concern for the success of students, but other issues seemed to take priority. Having access as a priority is often reflected in the colleges' mission statements. Within the past five years, community colleges have begun to recognize the importance of placing a priority on student success. A number of policies at community colleges have been changed or implemented in an effort to increase student success. American Association of Community Colleges report stated that colleges need to move from fragmented course-taking to clear, coherent educational pathways, from low rates of student success to high rates of student success, from tolerance of achievement gaps to commitment to



eradicating achievement gaps, and from a culture of anecdote to a culture of evidence. In response, community colleges have focused in part on developing “guided pathways” designed to help students, especially those first-time students with little to no “college knowledge,” navigate their way through a degree program toward successful completion or transfer. Students on Guided Pathways are often directed to take general education and possibly one or more developmental courses in those early semesters.

Legislators and boards want accountability and student retention leading to graduation or transfer is a good measure of success for them. By utilizing Guided Pathways, students have a clear map to success. Chapter 3 describes the research design, with a focus on data collection and analysis.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

One important problem at CCFT is low student retention, as indicated by data on the institution's public website. I conducted semi structured interviews with students and faculty to explore their perceptions of Guided Pathways, the institution's student retention initiative. The examination of perceptions, feelings, and experiences is commonly established in qualitative studies and reflects a constructivist perspective, meaning that reality is viewed as subjective and based on the perspective and experience of the individual (Burkholder, Cox, & Crawford, 2016). Quantitative researchers examine numerical data (Creswell, 2003). Because my goal was to examine the perspectives of CCFT students and faculty regarding low student retention at the institution, I did not quantify variables.

I used a qualitative case study design, instead. In Chapter 2, I reviewed the relevant scholarly research and theory related to the evolving mission of community colleges, the Guided Pathways model (Bailey et al., 2015), student success, retention, academic advising, and the conceptual framework for the study, which was Tinto's (1998) student integration model. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the research design, with a focus on data collection and analysis.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The purpose of this study was to explore student and faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of Guided Pathways as a retention strategy at one community college. During scheduled interviews, I asked students and faculty a series of questions to gain

knowledge of how they perceive the relationship between student retention and implementation of Guided Pathways. I took notes on how the participants were engaged in the conversation. During the interviews, I made sure the participants were comfortable and gave each participant time to respond.

Multiple approaches can be used in qualitative research and quantitative research. I used a basic qualitative methodology to examine one large community college. Researchers use case studies to explore, explain, or describe in research and examine current events in context (Yin, 2014). Case studies are versatile, and researchers can examine different variables; analysis of different sources of information is required for data triangulation (Yin, 2014). The researcher determines the case, which can be an individual student or faculty member (Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017), an organization, or a school (Parylo & Zepeda, 2015). This case study was conducted at CCFt at one of the main campuses. I selected a case study method because I wanted to examine in depth one community college that had implemented the curriculum mapping technique for student retention.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I am a full-time associate professor at CCFt. I teach on a different campus than the one used in this study and in a different program. I interviewed students and faculty while maintaining the data in a secured fashion. A password-protected device was used solely for the research, and I was and am the only person with the password. Documents were secured in a locker drawer in my office. I did not have any type of relationship with

the student participants as I do not teach general education courses. I also did not have any type of relationship with any of the faculty who were interviewed. The lack of relationships was helpful in avoiding researcher bias.

### **Methodology**

According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), by using qualitative interviews, researchers can explore important personal issues. The use of qualitative methodology allows the researcher to gather the type of data most appropriate to the study's purpose and RQs. Qualitative research is a form of in-depth study in which a researcher uses data collected in person and through observation of individuals in their natural environment (Creswell, 2003, 2012). Unlike quantitative methods that present results as numerical data, qualitative research produces narrative responses in the form of words (Creswell, 2012). The researcher analyzes the data to determine trends associated with the study's variables (Saldaña, 2015). The characteristics of the case study design were compatible with the scope and features of this study. The implementation of Guided Pathways is a contemporary event situated in a unique community college environment that has multiple campuses.

### **Participant Selection**

I selected participants from one community college that had implemented the Guided Pathways model. Qualitative researchers must ensure they can access their participants and that the participants have experience with the phenomenon under study (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). I reached out to the PRE director at CCFT to identify

relevant participants for the study. From the list of names, I drafted an e-mail to possible participants asking for volunteers to participate in the study (see Appendix A). I selected participants based on the order in which they responded, so there was no bias. Initial contact of potential participants occurred by e-mail with the informed consent attached with an explanation of the study and a request to participate. This e-mail introduction and explanation of the purpose of the study, with a request for help, was the first part of establishing contact. I also sent an email to all full-time faculty who were teaching or had taught English 101, at the same campus, during the selected time frame requesting volunteers. I accepted the first five respondents to my request from each semester (Fall 2015 to Fall 2018) to participate in the survey. I also sought three to five full-time English professors on the same campus to volunteer to participate. I conducted the interviews based on the questions I developed (see Appendix B). Interviews took place via phone, Zoom, and face-to-face.

### **Instrumentation**

Interviews from students and faculty were the primary data collected. Each interview included a standard set of questions, and I used additional questions to clarify information or encourage participants to expand their answers. I created interview questions related to the central concern of both RQs, the participants' perceptions of Guided Pathways (see Appendix B).

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

I identified student participants who had been exposed to Guided Pathways from 2015-2018 with the help of PRE at CCFT. I asked PRE to supply names and e-mail addresses of all students who were enrolled in English 101 at one main campus in fall semesters between 2015 and 2018. Participation in research was voluntary, and each participant received an introductory letter explaining the purpose of the research. Prior to the interview, each participant received an informed consent form to allow the participants to state whether they were willing to participate in the interview and alerting them that the interview could be stopped at any time. The informed consent also notified the participants that they did not need to answer any questions that they did not feel comfortable answering. I will maintain a copy of the signed informed consents with all other research documents locked in a secure drawer in my office for 5 years.

Interviews of student and faculty represent the primary data collected for this study. To provide flexibility, comfort, and privacy, I limited the interviews to one time, 1-hour semi structured interviews conducted via phone, Zoom, or in person. To ensure privacy for the phone, or Zoom interviews, I used my office with the door closed. To ensure suitable space for in-person interviews, it was important to coordinate with the participants to determine an available room that was most conducive to gathering information. It was important that participants feel comfortable so that their answers to questions provided the needed information to complete the case study successfully.

I audio recorded and transcribed each interview. In order to provide anonymity, each participant received a number. Confirmation of contact information at the end of the interview was necessary to send a transcript of the interview to them for their review. Having participants examine transcripts of the interview ensured the precision of the data collected, contributing to the credibility of the study (Devault, 2018). The storage and protection of all research materials is vital. Transfer of all electronic files of transcripts, recordings, and informed consents to a flash drive for storage are part of the process of keeping track of the data. I will keep the flash drive combined with all memos, journals, and research notes, for five years under lock and key to protect confidentiality.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I collected data for analysis from semi-structured interviews and verify or refute the interview information with a document review of the activities related to Guided Pathways. During the interview, I took note of how the interviewee was answering questions including body language. The purpose of this study was to explore student and faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of Guided Pathways as a retention strategy at one community college. By asking the interview questions, data was gathered to determine if the retention strategy did in fact increase retention. After the participants approve the transcripts, I reviewed and interpreted the data from the interviews using open coding and thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2015)). Coding is an iterative process and requires examination and reexamination of the data, followed by a development of emerging themes (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). The writing of a researcher journal and

analytic memos during the process assisted with reflection on my own feelings, biases, and beliefs as I sort and review the data.

It is important in qualitative research to maintain reflective journals, and to write memos, to allow for immersion with the data. I kept a reflective journal throughout the process and write memos as I analyzed the data. I logged all data according to location and by participant in a numbered system that provides for confidentiality, but keeps the information organized. Reflective journaling, memos, and data logs assisted with data analysis.

Discrepant cases could create a problem with the data and therefore with the data analysis. A discrepant case in this study might be a participant who has no knowledge of what CCFT is doing in regard to student retention or has a very different account of student retention within the college. Encountering a participant lacking prerequisite knowledge of the college's student retention initiatives like Guided Pathways required securing another participant to interview from that college, to ensure adequate data for the research.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is the equivalent of validity in a qualitative study, and I established this by setting up checks and balances within the study that ensure the rigor and quality (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). Examining student retention with different data collection methods, such as a semi-structured interview and a document review, provides for data triangulation to increase trustworthiness through increased



credibility (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). I had a peer reviewer from PRE review all my documentation to make sure it is credible and dependable. With the data collected, I can show transferability, knowing that other community colleges have issues with student retention. Furthermore, the use of five participants from each Fall semester provides for triangulation of perspectives between participants (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). I kept a secure audit trail, which highlights every step of data analysis that were made in order to provide a rationale for the decisions made. I had participants review my transcriptions and the findings in the member checking process as another method of increasing credibility and increasing the trustworthiness of the research (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). The documentation of the study had details about conducting the study and reflections from my research journal, to increase dependability. Lastly, providing and keeping the documentation that outlines how the study was conducted, and the data analyzed, allowed for confirmability, because other researchers are able to review and validate my methods and findings.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Using a qualitative procedure allowed the research to be more naturalistic and depend on personal observations in a real-world setting (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). However, in a study such as a qualitative one in nature, data was obtained by the researcher using tools created, implemented, analyzed, and then coded by the same researcher. This process could possibly contain errors due to the researcher's bias or subjectivity (Leung, 2015). Elaborating on a respondent's answer puts words in their

mouth and, while leading questions and wording aren't types of bias themselves, they can lead to bias or are a result of bias (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). To avoid this bias, I only asked the questions created and not ask leading questions. By asking quality questions at the right time and remaining aware and focused on sources of bias, researchers can enable the truest respondent perspectives and ensure that the resulting research lives up to the highest qualitative standards (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). Using reflective journaling, the researcher kept track of biases and personal assumptions (Cope, 2014). Keeping and using reflective journals enabled me to make my experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings visible and an acknowledged part of the research design, analysis, and interpretation process. If I did find that there is bias, I had the participants review the data for accuracy. I also had the option reach out to PRE at CCFT to determine my next course of action if I was unable to deal with the bias alone. Participants were selected from a pool of participants and asked to volunteer to interview. Participants were involved in interviews either via phone, Zoom on in person interviews. The data was coded to protect the students. The data set was password protected and I was the only one that knew the password. All data will be maintained for five years. After five years, data will be destroyed through shredding process. During interviews, I maintained confidential notes on a password protected device designated only for the study. IRB approval was obtained through Walden University, and the college where the study was conducted, before any interviews took place. All documentation being used was examined by both

entities and approved. Site permission for the interviews was obtained before data collection.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 contained the methodology that was used in this dissertation. The purpose of this qualitative study was to interview students and faculty, to obtain their perception of obstacles to college retention. The study procedures are described for one community college. Any ethical considerations were also discussed. The researcher has gained IRB approval from both Walden University, and the school where the study was held. The target population was recruited by email. Interested persons contacted the researcher by email. The researcher emailed students and faculty asking them to set up an interview time. The first five students per semester to reply were interviewed, and an additional three to five faculty were interviewed. Then, students first time enrolled in English 101 were interviewed to obtain their viewpoints about college retention obstacles. These interviews took place via phone, Zoom or in person. The interviews were conducted by the researcher using a standardized method of using the same questions for each student and faculty and allowed for follow-up questions. The interviews were taped for later transcription. The interviews were transcribed, and the data was coded.

Also, in Chapter 3, the protection of individuals and any ethical consideration were noted. Before conducting interviews, the students signed an informed consent sheet. Students and faculty understood that the interviews were confidential, and that the

students and faculty could leave the study at any time. The ethical consideration most likely to occur was researcher bias. The researcher chose participants at a first come first serve basis. The researcher did not know the participants and took care to not add or subtract from the students' personal viewpoints. Finally, the researcher asked other respected individuals for assistance to check for any researcher biases.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore student and faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of Guided Pathways as a retention strategy at one community college. This study focused on student and faculty perceptions of the implementation of curriculum mapping at a community college, CCFT. The first RQ considered in this study was, How do students perceive the relationship between student retention and implementation of Guided Pathways? If students felt that Guided Pathways was the reason they continued to take course work, that would show that the implementation of this strategy was an effective tool for retention (see Mann Levesque, 2018). The target population of students consisted of students who had taken English 101 at one of the main campuses at the community college; the students were also first-generation college students. I selected five students who had taken the course during each fall semester between 2015 and 2018. I sent all students who had taken the course during the specific time frame an e-mail invitation to participate in the study (see Appendix A). This e-mail also had the informed consent attached; students were directed to return the signed consent indicating their agreement to participate in the interview. I selected the first five students who completed the consent form.

The second RQ for this study was, How do faculty perceive the relationship between student retention and implementation of Guided Pathways? The focus of this question was on how well the faculty knew about Guided Pathways and how they were implementing the strategy to help with student retention (see Mann Levesque, 2018). An

e-mail invitation was sent to English faculty by the dean of the English department requesting volunteers to participate. Faculty members were sent the informed consent, and those who returned the informed consent were asked to schedule an interview. I recruited four faculty members from this e-mail invitation who teach in English 101 on the same campus as the students selected for the study. Selecting the faculty who taught in the English department was important because this is one course that is required for almost all of the degree programs at CCFT. Faculty members for this course would thus possibly have a better understanding of Guided Pathways. These faculty members may have taught some of the students participating in the study. I did not inform faculty participants about the identities of student participants.

Chapter 4 begins with an overview of the setting, data collection procedures, and data analysis. I also address validity issues for the study. Discussion continues with an analysis of results as related to the study's RQs. The chapter concludes with a summary of findings.

### **Setting**

The setting was a community college in a state in the Eastern region of the United States. This community college is a multi campus institution with approximately 28,000 credit students enrolled per year. The retention rate for students returning is approximately 50%, according to the institution's public website. Nationwide, 2-year community colleges and for-profit 4-year schools have average completion rates below 40% (Nadworny, 2019). I focused only on students who entered English 101 between

Fall 2015 and Fall 2018. I selected participants on a first come, first served basis. I did not gather data on participant sex as I was focused on student and faculty perceptions of retention strategies. CCFT has a larger population of female students than male students, according to its website. Student participants were first-generation students on one of the main campuses. Semi structured interviews took place either by phone, Zoom, or face-to-face. The face-to-face interviews were conducted by me and took place in my office with the door closed for privacy.

### **Participants**

Student participants in this study were students enrolled in English 101 as a first-generation student entering in the semesters between Fall 2015 and Fall 2018. I selected English 101 because the majority of majors at CCFT require English 101 as a prerequisite. I did not select participants based on their age, gender, or race. In addition to student participants, I recruited four faculty members who taught English 101 during the same time frame on the same campus. Students were excluded if English 101 was not their first college-level course. Students were sent an invitation e-mail with the description of the study and the informed consent. The instructions in the e-mail were to return the signed informed consent if one agreed to participate in the study. Potential participants sent the signed informed consent to my e-mail. I set up interviews with the first 19 individuals who returned the consent form to me. After weeks of recruiting participants, I had 15 students and four faculty who agreed to participate in this study.

### **Data Collection**

Chapter 4 includes the research findings and an overview of the data analysis and results from the case study. As the researcher, I used the interview protocol (see Appendix B) to engage participants in a discussion relating to their perception of retention related to implementation of Guided Pathways. In Fall 2015, CCFt began to use Guided Pathways as a tool for student retention. The data had not been previously analyzed to determine if Guided Pathways did increase student retention. In this study, I analyzed students' and faculty members' perceptions of the retention model. I collected data from 15 students and four faculty using semi structured interviews.

Interviews took place in a private setting. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), conducting interviews is common in educational settings. The researchers also noted that interviews build on some of the skills of ordinary conversations (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 5). I analyzed interview data to answer the study's RQs. The interview protocol for this case study included introductory and closing dialogue and questions based on student or faculty interviews. . Some participants required additional prompting. I anticipated interviews would last no more than one hour, which was the case.

Additionally, I recorded occasional written notes during the interviews to capture my initial thoughts on the data and wrote reminder notes about follow-up questions I thought of while participants were speaking. However, because I wanted to keep my focus on what the participants were saying, rather than on note-taking, I kept all note-taking to a minimum. During the interviews, I was observant of any of the participants



feeling uneasy. Interview questions were not personal, and no one appeared to be upset over any questions. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), if both the interviewer and participant are comfortable with one another, the interviewer can elicit a more productive conversation (p. 110). Most of the participants answered the questions in a focused manner and did not add much more information.

I collected data for analysis from semi structured interviews. I conducted the interviews face-to-face or via Zoom. Some of the students were more comfortable using Zoom because they did not have to make a special trip to campus. The interview questions were straightforward, and there were no unusual circumstances that I encountered throughout the data collection.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I was the primary researcher in this study. Therefore, I was responsible for all aspects of data collection and analysis, including transcription of the raw digital interview data. Finally, I was responsible for the safe handling and securing of data as previously described in the “Ethical Procedures” section of Chapter 3. Informed consents were signed prior to setting up the interviews. I have locked those forms in a drawer where I will store them for 5 years.

### **Data Analysis**

Semi-structured interviews were transcribed and coded based on responses from participant students and faculty. Following a thorough review of the transcribed material, I organized the data using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Then, I coded

quotes into categories, and developed emerging themes. Fifteen students and four faculty members were interviewed using the interview questions (see Appendix B). Students were selected from multiple years, based on when they took English 101 at one of the main campuses. Themes that developed from student participants differed from those of faculty participants and appear in separate sections.

## **Results**

### **Results From Students**

While interviewing students, I asked the questions and waited for a response. Students were identified by “S” and the number they were assigned, for example the first student I interviewed was S1. Based on responses from students in the early phase of implementation (Fall 2015), they did not clearly understand what Guided Pathways is. Students in the later years (Fall 2017 & Fall 2018) had a better understanding of why Guided Pathways was implemented. Students did not always know they were placed in a specific pathway and even why they were placed in a specific pathway. After explaining the purpose of the study, reviewing the informed consent, I began asking the questions to the students. The first question asked of the students was “*Can you tell me how you first came to the decision to attend CCFt?*” Students were able to answer right away. Statements related to why they attended include:

- S1~ “Family wanted me to do better, I started in 2015 and graduated in 2018 with an associate in Associate of Applied Science~ Air Traffic Control.”

- S2~ “Family wanted me to do better, I started in 2016 and transferred to another university in 2018 to obtain a bachelor’s degree in accounting.”
- S3~ “CCFt was the most affordable alternative in my decision to begin my career in Mathematics. I am currently at a university finishing classes to be a math teacher.”
- S4~ “I was not ready for SAT exam for a 4-year college since I only did 3 years of high school in this country therefore, I decided to start from community college.”
- S5~ “Single mom, tired of working two and three jobs at a time. No previous college and it was a good starting point for me.”
- S6~ “I chose CCFT as it was the local community college and just made sense.”
- S7~ “I was a Senior in high school, and I do not know how, but I was placed to go on a field trip to CCFT to do a placement test. I ended up doing the, “Parallel Enrollment Program”. Took my high school classes in the morning and went to CCFT in the afternoons.”
- S8~ “My cousin was in her last semester of nursing school at CCFT and talked about how much she enjoyed the program, professors, and staff. Also, after seeing how much money I would save attending a community college as opposed to the private university, I was in. I was completely

convinced. I am glad I made the switch and can see a huge difference in my happiness.”

- S9~ “I first started attending CCFT because I was eligible for dual enrollment my senior year of high school (2015/2016) and while still being a high school student the college classes were much less expensive. I ended up staying after high school because it was the better financial option for college.”
- S10~ “It was my Aunt who suggested that CCFT is a good school. Her son went to CCFT for his 1st 2 years and finished a bachelor’s degree in another University and is now very successful. And it is only 4 miles away where I live.”
- S11~ “I didn't want to take out student loans, so I chose community college as the cheaper route.”
- S12~ “It was my local community college and close to home.”
- S13~ “I wanted to start some prerequisites in my senior year of high school.”
- S14~ “While I was in high school, I was enrolled in a dual enrollment program.”
- S15~ “I ended up at CCBC 2017, 23 years old, single mother of a 7-year-old, no guidance, no support system, an idea of going into computer science but no idea of how to reach that goal.”

**Themes.** Throughout data analysis on student responses, 92 codes emerged. Those codes merged into five categories which were then condensed to three main themes. Those themes were Cost (Theme 1), Support (Theme 2) and Time constraints (Theme 3).

**Theme 1: Cost.** The first theme that emerged was cost. The average cost of attending a community college varies based on location (Feldman & Romano, 2019). There are more states that are trying to offer free college to students who meet certain criteria. The cost per credit at CCFT is approximately \$110 per credit, plus fees (Public website for CCFT, 2020). Students indicated CCFT had lower costs than universities and that was the main reason for choosing the community college. According to Nadworny, (2019) students who are working part-time or full-time are often struggling financially, with college affordability as a major factor in their success. Students tend to drop out because of financial pressures they are facing. Student participants used terms like *cost*, *affordability*, *convenience*, and *fair tuition and fees*. Statements demonstrating participants' understanding of cost include

- “I am attending CCFT due to cost and affordability.” (S1)
- “Free college would be easier. I am thankful my parents paid for my college but not everyone has that.” (S2)
- “I am happy with how CCFT offers an affordable and fair tuition/fee schedule.” (S11)

Tuition and fees, as a percentage of public 4-year institution tuition and fees, increased from 49.7% to 51.7%. CCFt is currently above the benchmark of less than 50% of the average tuition and fees at a 4-year public institution in the eastern part of the United States (Public website for CCFt, 2020). With the economy today, it is harder for students to attend full time school without having to work. The college Promise Scholarship was implemented for students who do not meet requirements for the Pell Grant. *“The Community College Promise Scholarship is a last dollar award, available to students that plan to enroll in credit-bearing coursework leading to a vocational certificate, certificate, or an Associate's Degree; or in a sequence of credit or non-credit courses that leads to licensure or certification; or in a registered apprenticeship program at a Maryland community college for the 2020-2021 academic year”* (MHEC.org, 2020). Since this is a new program, making sure advisors are aware of all the resources for students is important. This can help students prepare for their education knowing that cost is not going to prevent them from starting classes.

**Theme 2: Support.** The second theme that emerged was support. Students often stated they were more likely to return to college if they had support from their teachers, faculty, and advising. If a student does not feel supported, the student might transfer from his or her current institution to a more supportive one, because of their higher levels of educational goals and academic abilities (Aljohani, 2016b). Understanding what students want in regard to support is important as well. When students were asked “What do you feel CCFt is doing well in regard to student retention?” The responses were:

- S1~ “Making it affordable for students and convenient. It’s nice to know we have support when making choices for classes.”
- S2~ “Having advisors help me choice classes based on my major is convenient.”
- S3~ “The cost is one great reason it's very affordable versus a university and Student Life always has something going on giving students a reason to hang around on campus staying interested in actually being there also it's plenty of resources where you shouldn't fail.”
- S4~ “Faculty and instructors are very encouraging and helpful to make students successful. Furthermore, CCFT has smaller size classes compared to a four-year college which benefits students and instructors to ask questions and provide extra support if needed.”
- S5~ “I think the majority of people that go to community college are often trying to get the first few years done at a cheaper cost OR ones that have been out of school for a long time and looking to finish a degree or change of careers, so I feel the retention in those ones is automatic because they are there for a specific reason. As for the students who are fresh out of high school that chose CCFT as their total college experience ... things like on campus activities, sports, or free things is probably very appealing to them and might help with retention.”
- S6~ “Convenient and affordable.”
- S7~ “I have no idea what CCFT is doing regarding anything, I am just trying to take the classes I need. I don’t pay attention to anything other than registration.”

- S8~ “Having other programs besides degree programs is really good for CCFT. If it was not for the certificate program I am in, I would not have returned to this school for any degree.”
- S9~ “I think it is helpful that CCFT sends out emails and text alerts geared towards student success and will include some of the resources available to students.”
- S10~ “Not sure about student retention. I think really good, encouraging professors encouraged me to stay and finished what I started.”
- S11~ “For me, CCFT offers an affordable and fair tuition/fee schedule. CCFT is also very flexible in regard to availability of class times, program options, etc.”
- S12~ “They are really welcoming to students and are very affordable. I was assigned an advisor who helped me select classes that I needed.”
- S13~ “I think so, most people I know either started their classes at CCFT or got a degree from CCFT and return to continue to further their education in their current area or to start with a new degree.”
- S14~ “Pretty well, they always have someone you can speak to help you along the way.”
- S15~ “They offer a variety of support services to help students become successful. I was assigned an advisor, discussed my goals, helps plans my schedule, given a list of services available if needed, and signed a contract. This alone encourages me to do well because what excuse can I give if I’m not



successful? Also, the advisor evaluates my grades and has to sign off on next semesters schedule.”

Students that understood what Guided Pathways’ purpose was, indicated that student retention strategies were working. According Prystowsky, Koch, and Baldwin, (2015) colleges need to increase meaningful connections across the campus community. Guided Pathways encourages students to connect through the pathways. To assist students better, advisors need to be trained to have those difficult conversations with students to determine if they are prepared for college courses. During this process, difficult conversation’s advisors should discuss time management, commitment, and ways to overcome obstacles (Ferdousi, 2016). There should also be an online advising support icon beside the instructional lab provided on the campus. Students should be able to have access to online tutoring, library, counseling, and financial aid icons (Ferdousi, 2016). Students who participated in the scheduled pathway events indicated they were more supported. The pathway events were scheduled throughout the year and were promoted through social media. The pathway events included get involved fairs offering student success supports and activities that were geared toward successful degree and certificate completion, transfer and career success. The students that I interviewed all returned for multiple semesters. They either graduated with a certificate or degree, or they transferred their credits to a university.

CCFt is always looking for ways to improve student retention. As of today, students who enter the General Studies pathways are assigned a mentor. This mentor is

expected to assist them in selecting classes while utilizing the curriculum map. The “General Studies pathway” was selected as the group that received the mentors to help guide students if they chose to switch pathways as they were taking classes. An estimated 20 to 50 percent of students enter college as undecided, and an estimated 75 percent of students change their major at least once before graduation (Horn & Moesta, 2019). Students benefit from getting to know one another. Even if the students are in a cohort and already familiar with most of their classmates, use classroom exercises to force them to occasionally interact with classmates they don’t normally hang out with (Steinhauer, 2017). Offering the activities with the pathways will continue to help the students feel like they belong.

***Theme 3: Time Constraints.*** The third theme to emerge was time constraints. Students shared they would often avoid extracurricular activities related to Guided Pathways due to their busy personal schedules. Most students verbalized they still had to work, or they were dually enrolled. The dually enrolled students were either junior or seniors in high school while taking college level courses. Participants answered the question “How do you manage your time commitments outside of school? (work, family or other activities)”

- S1~ “I was fortunate enough that since my parents wanted me to go to school that I did not have to work. My job was school. I tried to attend all the activities.”
- S2~ “I did not have to work. My job was school.”

- S3~ “One thing at a time....I'm happy that my tenure at work allows me the freedom to study and complete assignments for class and I don't have any children, yet which is also a bonus as far as any other activities if it doesn't involve studying I can't make it.”
- S4~ “First two years of college were not as challenging but later on I had to cut down my work hours and personal pleasure activities such as video gaming. I have always lived with my parent since it is our culture and it has been a big help as a student.”
- S5~ “I struggle finding good balance; but basically, family comes first and then I try juggle everything else. I think once I finish school, I can better manage commitments properly.”
- S6~ “I sacrifice sleep most days. I am a single mom of two toddlers and I also help take care of my elderly parents. I am the first person in my family to go to college, which also puts more stress on me to do well. I do my best to have my children help when they can around the house, basically I am a one woman show.”
- S7~ “I have a planner and write everything down. When I took my first class, I wrote down everything and tried to stay involved with all the activities that were going on.”
- S8~ “My planner is my bible. I keep a handheld planner on me wherever I go and keep a desk calendar in my room, therefore I plan any activities according to what

I have scheduled each week. For example, if I have an exam the upcoming week my close friends and family know that It means I am not going out very much that weekend, but if I don't have important deadlines or exams then I allow myself to have some fun and go out on the weekend.”

- S9~ “I originally put work before school because I had to financially. I’ve changed that approach since being in school. I put school as the focus and priority and even left my job for the year to be able to focus on school as much as possible. My second priority would definitely be family and I try to spend as much time as possible with them.”
- S10~ “It is hard to manage time outside of school. I had to send my only daughter to my parents in another state so they can look after her and help her study. I am the first person in my family to go to college and I want to make my parents and children proud. I worked night shift and it is hard to stay awake during the day. Sleeping less but trying to compensate with good nutrition.”
- S11~ “I’ve learned to say no if I cannot do something (attend a family event, stay over at work)-I have a self-schedule option at my job, which is a great help in balancing school and work. -I use a calendar to keep track of everything in both my academic and personal life.”
- S12~ “When I first started school, it was easy, I was single and was able to go to school full-time. Fast forward to today, I am married and have a daughter. My husband helps a lot with my daughter, I do schoolwork when my daughter sleeps,

and I work two days a week. Everything else I plan in advance. I thought I would finish school in two years, but life happens.”

- S13~ “I try to prepare myself as much as possible prior to starting a course then while I am in the course I try to focus as much time as possible on the course while my family is busy at work during the days and I dedicate my weekends to working and my weekdays to schoolwork.”
- S14~ “Planning, I am a huge planner, I sit down once a week and make sure everything is as organized as it can be. When I took my first class, I thought it would be easy to do but I know that my education needs to be priority.”
- S15~ “I had to save and financially plan. Now I’m only working on weekends, which allows me ample time for studying without having to stress about bills and any additional school cost.”

Students in the early implementation of Guided Pathways did not always know what pathway they were in, or even what Guided Pathways was. Participant S11 stated *“I do not have enough knowledge of Guided Pathways or any type of pathway to answer this question.”* As the years passed after CCFt first implemented Guided Pathways, faculty and staff did a better job of explaining to students and offering more information to advisors. Participant S4 had a better understanding of Guided Pathways by stating: *“I kept in touch with the advisor who initially helped me to register for the classes. I also used CCFt website to explore different majors and careers.”* Students want to do well and want support. Participant S9 stated *“I feel that the faculty are way more involved in*

*the students and the campus. In one semester, I have already participated in more campus events and activities than I did in when I first started in 2018. Guided Pathways has increased support for me. I know that I have support from faculty and staff.”*

According to Aljohani, (2016a) higher retention comes from administrative support. Faculty advisers' job is to help students plan their schedules, be successful in their course work, and prepare for their careers (Ferdousi, 2016). By having faculty and staff encourage students, students will more than likely return for subsequent semesters.

Students were from the same college and knew that they were interviewing about the Guided Pathways, there were no discrepancy cases. Students were sent an e-mail asking for participation in the study. Although they did not know the questions I was going to ask, the e-mail described the purpose of the study. Students were selected on a first-come-first-serve basis. Even though not all the students knew what Guided Pathway they were in, they knew enough to volunteer for the study. Approximately 67 percent (66.6%) of first-time students required at least one developmental education course in Fall 2018 (Public website for CCFt, 2020). This study only focused on students taking English 101 as their first course. Future research could be done on a broader student population. This study only focused on students that were enrolled in English 101 as their first course. Students do not always start with English 101 and that could be why there was no discrepancy cases.

## **Results From Faculty**

I was able to formally interview four faculty members that teach in the English department on the same campus the students I interviewed attended. I conducted one-on-one interviews with faculty. I reminded them their answers were confidential, and I wanted honest answers. I selected the same campus as the primary source because participant students may have had these faculty for their class. Faculty were asked questions (see Appendix B) and given time to answer. During data collection, faculty were identified with a “F” then the number for exam F1, F2, etc. This helped to maintain confidentiality. I did not personally know faculty who were interviewed as I do not teach on the same campus.

**Themes.** Throughout data analysis of faculty interviews, 52 codes emerged. After reviewing the data, two main themes emerged during the interviews: community and advising. Faculty I interviewed all had vested interest in the college. Most of them mentioned they attended CCFT for their undergraduate work and wanted to give back to the community. Just like student responses, faculty all mentioned that CCFT needs more advisors for the Guided Pathways to be a strong retention strategy. With only interviewing four faculty, there was not a lot of variety in the interview data .

**Theme 1: Community.** Working at a community college has lots of benefits. Faculty are usually from the area, which can increase retention rates with knowing that faculty return to the school they attended for their undergraduate studies. In a study completed by Pons, Burnett, Williams and Paredes, (2017), faculty were asked why they

chose community college over a university. Approximately 68% of the faculty stated they preferred to work at a local college that they were familiar with and 54% of the faculty stated they chose to work at the community college for the students (p. 48).

. Community colleges educate almost half of the country's undergraduates, so there is a significant job market for faculty (Thirolf & Woods, 2017). Community college faculty have more flexibility with their schedules and are able to focus on instruction rather than conducting research. Community college professors are primarily responsible for teaching, not researching (Thirolf & Woods, 2017).

When asked "Why did you choose CCFT?" the responses were clear:

- F1~ "I chose the community college because they offered me the opportunity to teach English to students at all ability levels and to help students realize their dreams, as well as to grow professionally and personally in a non-restrictive non-threatening environment. I live in the area and it just made sense to work here and I have been here for a long time."
- F2~ "I was born and raised in the county and feel like I know the area well and its student population. I also enjoy teaching at CCFT because of the plethora of professional development opportunities that are offered and also my wonderful students and generous, collaborative, and like-minded colleagues. Plus, CCFT is one of the only local colleges/universities still hiring full-time faculty members! (Every other school where I've taught has moved exclusively to an adjunct model.)"



- F3~ “I have always lived in the area; I went to school here before the campuses were combined. I felt that I wanted to give back to my community. CCFt also has tons of professional development for me as well as new faculty. I like how the college puts us in front like they put the students first. Keeps most of us here. That’s why I stay, our administration is very supportive.”
- F4~ “It’s my alma mater. I grew up in the area and knew I wanted to teach here when I finished school.”

Having faculty invested in their students is a great attribute to CCFt. Faculty that live in the area can also help with guiding students to obtain jobs. Faculty that I interviewed all had strong ties to the community. They enjoyed working for the community college.

***Theme 2: Advising.*** This theme was represented in all the interviews. Faculty indicated CCFt needs more advisers to help guide students. There are times when students just come to the college to take classes, but do not really know what they want to do. For students that do not have a declared major, at the time of registration, they are placed in the General Studies Pathway. After taking some classes, students have a hard time switching to another pathway, as they do not know how or who to talk to. Faculty responses for the follow question are below “What do you perceive are barriers to implementation of Guided Pathways in higher education?”

- F1~”Students placed in pathways do not have as many opportunities to explore fields outside of their designated track. So, once they are placed in a pathway,

they may feel stuck or not know what else is out there that they would be interested in or excel in if given the opportunity to explore other pathways. Also, they might feel as though they cannot be interested in different majors/areas outside their own pathway. For example, drawing and biology are housed in two different pathways, but someone might want to be a medical illustrator. They would have to have both a science degree and an art degree; but, those two areas are in very different pathways with little overlap.”

- F2~ “It's always baffled me that students are not required to meet with an academic advisor, who could help them navigate their chosen pathway or even identify one if they're not sure which might be the right fit. I assume this is not a requirement because we have so many students and only so many advisors, but it's never made any sense to me why every student isn't automatically set up with an advisor who regularly checks in and helps them manage their course load at CCFT.”
- F3~ “Advising. I think we need more advisors. The advisors are stretched so thin that some students don't get the opportunity to meet with them. There are students who just don't know what to do and they spend way too much money on trying to figure it out. I like that we have implemented more strategies to help students but advising needs to be beefed up to be more effective.”
- F4~ “Student's not understanding the pathway process, and how to navigate through the college for help. We need more advisors to help support the students.”

Faculty need to have a better understanding of what the advisors deal with on a day to day basis. Faculty interviewed all suggested that CCFT was increasing strategies to improve student retention and they all knew the purpose behind the initiative of Guided Pathways. F3 stated “ *I think with all the incentives that CCFT has implemented it’s hard to determine which one is working better than others. We have initiatives like College Promise will also help with retention, but that remains to be seen.*” Again, with all the initiatives that are implemented, it is hard to determine if one strategy works better than others in a short amount of time. Each year, CCFT learns more of how Guided Pathways can increase student retention. To help students stay on track, the college strengthened its advising and degree-planning processes—two critical elements of the guided pathways model. (Public website for CCFT, 2020) According to data from retention rates at CCFT, retention increased from 36% to 43% after implementation of Guided Pathways (Public website for CCFT, 2020). Although there is no true data to show Guided Pathways was the only reason for the increase, more research is needed.

Interviews with faculty includes participants from the same campus of the institution that teach the same subject. I did not have any discrepancy cases with faculty as they all knew about Guided Pathways and the intent of the program. English 101 faculty was selected because most majors require English 101 as a prerequisite. This study only focused on the perception of how Guided Pathways had or had not increased student retention. Future research could be done with a variety of faculty.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

After I completed data analysis, I had a peer reviewer from the PRE team PRE at CCFT review all my documentation to make sure it is credible and dependable. During the IRB process, it was suggested that someone from CCFT's PRE team review that data to ensure its credibility and dependability. The reviewer did not work directly with any participants and their anonymity was assured with the removal of all personal identifiers. With the data collected, I can show transferability as student retention did increase. According to retention rates at CCFT, retention increased from 36% to 43% after implementation of Guided Pathways (Public website for CCFT, 2020). Knowing that other community colleges have issues with student retention. There is a lot of research on student retention (Soliz, 2018; Steinhauer, 2017; Tinto, 2006; Weller et al., 2018). By conducting this study, I can share a white paper with other local community colleges to possibly help their student retention issues. Participants completed the informed consent and sent them to me prior to setting up the interview. Since I was the only one who was completing the interviews, I was able to keep a journal to show dependability in the research. I kept notes throughout the interview process, jotting down findings based on interaction, and feelings. When completing data analysis, I reviewed these notes to see if there were any hesitation or participants feeling uneasy. These notes were subjective and were not shared with anyone. I had someone from PRE conduct an inquiry audit on the study. An inquiry audit involves having a researcher outside of the data collection and data analysis examine the processes of data collection, data analysis, and the results of the

research study (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). At the beginning of the interview, I stated the interviews would be confidential, and no one would be able to identify the comments. Each person was given a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. By interviewing students and faculty one on one, I believed that participants gave honest answers. I reminded them that their comments were confidential, and no one would see their names just their comments. To maintain confirmability, I provided and kept documentation that outlined how the study was conducted, and data analyzed. Qualitative research can be very subjective (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). During this process I remained neutral with all participants.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 4, I described details and data from the interviews, with examples of comments from interview participants. The RQs in this study were How do students perceive the relationship between student retention and implementation of Guided Pathways? (RQ1) and How do faculty perceive the relationship between student retention and implementation of Guided Pathways? (RQ2). One thing that is clear, between all the interviews, advising needs to be reevaluated to increase the number of advisors to have a more accurate model and employment of Guided Pathways. Students and faculty see value in having more advisors that can support students through their education process. The goal of Guided Pathways was to help students obtain their degrees in a timely fashion. In Chapter 5, I will review my conclusions to the study and identify areas to improve on for future research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The problem at CCFt is low student retention. According to the community college's website, retention rate in 2015 at CCFt were 36%. In 2015, CCFt initiated a new retention model, Guided Pathways (Bailey et al., 2015), to help increase student retention. Yet, the retention rate has increased to 43% since the implementation of Guided Pathways. Each college currently collects data to assess the overall effectiveness of this initiative. Future plans may include disaggregating outcomes by ethnicity. The purpose of this study was to explore student and faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of Guided Pathways as a retention strategy at one community college. Analysis of data gathered from individual participant interviews suggests that Guided Pathways has improved over the years. In the beginning years of implementation, students did not even know what Guided Pathways was. Findings from the data analysis also show that faculty who were not involved in the implementation did not fully understand how Guided Pathways helped with student retention. In the later years, students had a better understanding of the retention strategy. Faculty were more vested as the retention strategies improved.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

After completing all the interviews, I began data analysis, which revealed several common themes between students and faculty. Students in the early phases of implementation of Guided Pathways did not know what the strategy was. In the later years, students had a better understanding of the pathway they were placed in and why.

Both students and faculty indicated that advisors need to be more knowledgeable of the retention module. Students and faculty participants also expressed positive and negative experiences related to Guided Pathways. During the interview process, I did not consider any other variables (sex, race, religion, etc.), I only interviewed students who had been enrolled in English 101 on one of the main campuses. The faculty were also selected based on the same campus as the students.

The first common theme that emerged from the data was the cost of going to school. The cost of college is a main issue when assessing why students attend or do not attend college (Feldman, & Romano, 2019). According to Watson and Chen (2019), offering more educational resources to students can increase student retention. The federal government provides grants for students attending community college. Most types of grants, unlike loans, are sources of free money that generally do not have to be repaid (Grants, 2020). Yet, not all students are eligible for these types of grants. CCFt now offers additional governmental funding like the College Promise Scholarship. These additional benefits can open up opportunities for students who may not have been eligible for grants and scholarships like the Pell Grant. One of the challenges of offering these additional governmental benefits, however, is that the college has to increase student retention to receive federal funds (American Council on Education, 2018). Another area that colleges are looking at are partnerships and apprenticeship programs. CCFt has entered into partnerships with local businesses to help students afford to pay for college.

Another common theme that emerged from the data was advising. Tinto's (1975) theory of retention suggests that students want to feel part of a community. Providing student support service programs is relevant to Tinto's integration model as it can provide intrusive student support to students which can contribute to the academic integration. Application of Tinto's model can also foster social integration by making students feel a sense of belonging by alleviating the sense of alienation and isolation and ultimately meeting the needs of those who are first generation during the early years of the college experience (Nall, 2017). Community colleges do not have the same amenities as universities. Students do not live on campus. Student at CCFt commute between its campuses. Students who seek out academic advising support are more likely to continue in the program (Glew et al., 2019). Offering more support is key to keeping students on campus, enrolled and returning. The student participants whom I interviewed did return for multiple semesters. Some student participants graduated with a degree or certificate while others transferred to a university to complete their graduate degree. CCFt has partnerships with some local universities to make it easier for transfer students.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of the study was that only one community college was used to gain perceptions of students and faculty. I only interviewed students from one of the campuses who took English 101 as their first course. Some students do need to take remediation coursework first. Furthermore, I only interviewed five students from each year that were enrolled in English 101 as a first time student during the selected years.



### **Recommendations**

The first recommendation based on the results is to increase knowledge of the advisors and faculty. Having more advisors available to students at all times, not just at the beginning of the semester, can help keep students on track. Students need support year-round. According to Burge-Hall et al. (2019), identifying the need for adequate and proactive advising programs to foster student success is important. As the evidence from my investigation shows, more advisors are important. Academic advising offers a path to promote student retention and persistence to graduation (Kulls, 2016). Most of the students stated that they did not have the needed support, or their advisors were overwhelmed. The use of videoconferencing tools, such as GoToMeeting, Skype, or Zoom, provides real-time support services to distance learners. Videoconferencing replicates an in-person advising session. Virtual advisors and students have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with one another and review documents more efficiently with the use of this tool (Ohrablo, 2016). Implementing videoconferencing sessions also helps virtual learners feel connected and engaged with their program of study and university. Consequently, another benefit is the ability to record the session for future reference. In today's world, providing support to students is recognized as essential (Tinto, 2017).

Further research could be done with students in other course work. I selected English 101 because most of the majors at CCFt require English 101. Participants in this study noted several improvements in the use of the Guided Pathway model since

implementation in 2015. Faculty and staff have a better understanding of the Guided Pathways, and they are more involved in the pathway events. CCFt has also added more advisors to assist students and increased the pathway events each semester. Today, CCFt students are placed in a pathway upon admission to the college. There are six pathways that students can be placed in depending on their major: Arts; Business, Law and Education; General Studies; Humanities and Social Sciences; Science and Health Careers; and Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. Tinto (1975) theorized that students will be much more likely to continue in school when they feel part of the college community, both socially and academically. Placing students in similar classes can increase social engagement (Soria & Taylor, 2016). Students feel more connected to the college if they are in similar coursework. In a study on retention in first-year college students completed by Connolly et al., (2017), students had higher retention rates when they were enrolled in the same classes. This increased a student's support system as students as a first-year student can be stressed; encouraging students to enroll in the same courses helps them stay motivated (Connolly et al., 2017). The results of Connolly et al.'s study showed increased retention rates. At CCFt, students are encouraged to take the same classes to build friendships.

In addition to what CCFt is already doing with student retention, incorporating activities like High-Impact Practices (HIP) into the curriculum may increase student engagement. HIP is a relatively new concept in the classroom. HIPs are tools for teaching and learning that have been found to have positive effects on student retention (Hall &

O'Neal, 2016; White, 2018). HIP are being used in some of the course work, but we could add to more courses to increase retention. The more we can support our students the higher retention we should see. Future researchers should look at these student experiences and how the experiences shaped a student's decision to leave their educational pursuit. Future research could also investigate the programs or services offered at the community college to retain students and their effectiveness.

### **Implications**

The information found in this study has clear evidence that student retention remains an issue. One retention strategy does not fix all the issues. Educators need to do a better job of supporting their students to keep them returning. Literature suggests that students want a clear map of what they need to take. Taking unnecessary coursework puts a strain on students emotionally and financially. Guided Pathways is a good strategy to help students, but educators need to do better.

### **Conclusion**

This case study offered a positive contribution to the problem of low student retention rates. The use of a case study research allowed me to conduct one-on-one interviews in a private setting with students and faculty. By asking questions to students, this helped me gain understanding of what the students and faculty perceived about Guided Pathways.

This doctoral process helped me to gain strength and knowledge about research and how to improve social change. I also learned that, as an educator, it is my

responsibility to make every effort to impact the world in a positive way. I truly believe that when more students graduate from college, there will be a positive impact on society. The economy will improve and therefore our great country will benefit. This experience has given me the opportunity to follow the dream, though through a different path that I had as a young child. It has helped me realize my potential as a leader, someone that can affect change. I have decided to be a mentor for students in the General Studies program. This is a huge out of the box decision for me, as I have only known nursing. This doctoral process has opened up new opportunities for me to explore.

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## Appendix A: E-mail Invitation

Dear (insert name),

My name is Amy Ertwine, and I am an EdD student with Walden University with a concentration in Higher Education and Adult Learning. I am interested in perceptions of students/faculty related student retention after implementation of Guided Pathways.

I am sending this message to ask for volunteers to answer some questions about student retention and Guided Pathways. If you agree to volunteer, I would appreciate it if you could take approximately one hour of your time to meet me. I feel this topic is important as the college wants students to continue their education. As I have researched this topic, I have noted a lack of literature on student/faculty perceptions of student retention and Guided Pathways.

Again, this is voluntary to participate. If you are interested in volunteering, please fill out the informed consent form and return to me via email me at [amy.ertwine@waldenu.edu](mailto:amy.ertwine@waldenu.edu). Once I receive your informed consent, I will call or e-mail to set up a time to speak.

Thank you,

Amy Ertwine

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

### **Start interview protocol with quick explanation of what Guided Pathways is:**

Guided Pathways is one student retention initiative that CCFT implemented in the Fall of 2015. It's a student-centered approach that can increase the number of students earning community college credentials. Creating a curricular map for students using Guided Pathways helps students know exactly what courses they need and prevents them from taking unnecessary coursework.

### **RQ1: How do students perceive the relationship between student retention and implementation of Guided Pathways?**

- Can you tell me how you first came to the decision to attend CCFT?
- What classes did you take your first semester at CCFT?
- Describe your understanding of Guided Pathways.
- Do you know what pathway you were placed in and why?
- Describe any activities that were directly related to Guided Pathways and the pathway you were placed in.
- How do you manage your time commitments outside of school? (work, family or other activities)
- Do you feel your faculty encourage you to participate in the events?
- What do you feel CCFT is doing well in regard to student retention?
- What do you feel the value of Guided Pathways is?
- What do you feel could be improved?

- What would you like to see done in terms of student retention at CCFT?
- Do you participate in any clubs and/or organizations on campus? (Yes) Which ones interest you? /(No) Why not?
- Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about barriers or successes with student retention at CCFT?
- Is there any else you would like to tell me?

**RQ2: How do faculty perceive the relationship between student retention and implementation of Guided Pathways?**

- How long have you been a full-time faculty member at CCFT?
- Why did you choose CCFT?
- Describe your understanding of Guided Pathways.
- Where you part of the implementation of Guided Pathways at CCFT?
- How do you feel the process of implementing Guided Pathways has help CCFT?
- What do you perceive is working well in regard to student retention?
- What do you perceive are barriers to implementation of Guided Pathways in higher education?
- How would you recommend overcoming those barriers?
- What kind of impediments have you experienced or witnessed to career advancement in higher education?
- What do you feel CCFT is doing well in regard to student retention?

- What do you feel could be improved?
- What would you like to see done in terms of student retention at CCFt?
- Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about barriers or successes with student retention at CCFt?
- Is there any else you would like to tell me?